Experiencing the Meaning of Breathing

by **Steve Edwards**

Abstract

This research was motivated by the author's personal experiences with various breathing methods as well as meaningful breathing experiences reported by clients, colleagues and friends. The meaning of breathing is discussed in relation to consciousness, bodiliness, spirituality, illness prevention and health promotion. Experiencing the meaning of breathing is to experience more meaning in life itself. Experiential vignettes confirm that breathing skills may be regarded as an original method of survival, energy control, improving quality of life, preventing illness and promoting health.

Introduction

Human beings breathe to live. Since ancient times, this vital link between breath and life has provided the foundation for various religions, philosophies, beliefs and practices related to survival, preservation and promotion of life in this world and in the afterlife. For example, in its original, essential and literal meaning, psychology is concerned with the breath, energy, consciousness, soul or spirit of life that leaves a person at death and continues in some other form (Hergenhahn, 2001). The special focus of this research is on meaningful breathing experiences.

The changing nature of the reality investigated in a phenomenological approach requires an open-minded form of consciousness, characterized by an essential directedness or intentionality, which gives meaning to experience and is shaped by experience and meaning, as is consciousness and being, all in a constant state of change or becoming. Experience (as verb) denotes being involved in undergoing or living through something in the present, at this moment, as well as in a series of moments and events at various times and places, with experience (as noun, as in 'crystallized' experience) denoting that which is or has been undergone or lived through, as well as both the process or state of being involved, and the meaning attached thereto. Meaning is something given both immediately in experience as in a gestalt and/or later in the form of an investment of consciousness, which occurs for example in attributions and interpretations. Personally significant meaning often occurs in the form of insights during or after an experience, such as in or after a particularly meaningful breathing experience (Edwards, 2002).

This research was motivated by the health, well-being and psychotherapeutic correlates of various breathing techniques as experienced through personal practice and as reported by clients, colleagues and friends. While phenomenology can be distinguished from other descriptive and qualitative approaches in its focus on the structures of consciousness as a special realm of inquiry for revealing and effecting meaningful interventions (Edwards, 2001), the aim of this research was more descriptive and exploratory than interventionist in nature. The particular focus was to investigate the phenomenological structure of such meaningful breathing experiences.

Phenomenology may be broadly described as a philosophical movement that has permeated such human social sciences as psychology with regard to any orientation, attitude, approach, design, strategy, method, or technique with lived experience as its subject matter (Edwards, 2001; Giorgi, 1970; Kruger, 1988; Polkinghorne, 1989; Spinelli, 1989; Stones, 1986). A general phenomenological orientation, which assumes the interrelatedness of all phenomena, bridges artificial, conceptual distinctions between such terms as body, mind and spirit; the emphasis is rather on the lived experience of such phenomena, in terms of bodiliness, mentality and spirituality.

Phenomenology is concerned with the study of phenomena (Heidegger, 1927; Husserl, 1917; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In this regard, a phenomenon is something that reveals itself to consciousness, and a phenomenological approach refers to an attitude of consciously suspending any assumptions in order to allow phenomena to reveal themselves in their fresh, original reality. Such an approach means continually new discoveries as reality changes. It also means in-depth investigations of essential structures of reality. This changing reality includes the consciousness of the phenomenologist as well as the phenomena revealing themselves to consciousness. The approach is subjective to the extent to which it is concerned solely with the lived-world as it appears to the phenomenologist. It is objective to the extent phenomena are accurately interpreted by the phenomenologist and the truth of their reality intersubjectively agreed to by other phenomenologists (Giorgi, 1970). Such an approach prevents absolutising any particular essence into a dominant characteristic of consciousness, existence and reality. It implies pursuit of an ultimately unrealisable final truth.

The Meaning of Breathing

Breath means life. Breathing provides a measure of the quality and quantity of life. It is a typically unconscious and forgotten fact of life in its reality as a finite number of breaths and breath-taking moments. Individual human life in this world begins with the first breath of an infant and lasts about one hundred million breaths (Loehr & Migdow, 1999). When we die, we leave this world with one last clavicular breath. Humanity has long recognized the vital link between breath and life in terms of various beliefs and practices to preserve and promote life in this world and in the afterlife, as is evident in the following themes:

Consciousness

In a characteristically introspective insight, the famous North American founding father of phenomenological, behavioural and functionalist schools of thought in psychology, William James, remarked that the stream of consciousness was only a careless name for what, when scrutinized, revealed itself to consist chiefly in the stream of his own breathing (James, 1890). A widely travelled man, James was distilling thousands of years of knowledge of the art, science, spirituality and controlled practice of breathing known in India as *pranayama* and in China as *chi-gung,* or skill of energy control (Ralston, 1999; Reid, 1998).

The Yogic conception of *pranayama,* preceded and spawned many Taoist *chi-gung* methods. *Prana, chi,* or life force, is experienced and conceptualised as the connecting link between matter, life, mind, energy and consciousness (Hewitt, 1977: Reid, 1998; Taub-Bynaum, 1984).

> *Prana,* which exists on all the planes of manifestation, is the connecting link between matter and energy on the one hand, and consciousness and mind on the other. Consciousness expressing itself through the mind, cannot come into touch with matter and function through it without the intermediate presence of *prana*. (Hewitt, 1977, p. 421)

As a vital human function, breathing spans all levels of consciousness. It is a typically unconscious activity in most forms of human behaviour. Highly developed acts of skill such as swimming crawl and typically human forms of expression such as talking and singing require some form of breath control, which may be conscious or unconscious, depending upon various factors such as adaptation, need, arousal and cognition (Hewitt, 1977). Over centuries, conscious breathing in itself and various conscious methods of breath control have received increasing recognition. The earliest forms of conscious breathwork seem to have been related to spiritual beliefs and practices such as those concerning God, ancestors and human existence, with special reference to such matters as survival, health, life and death.

In conscious recognition of breathing as first life need, the primary mode of person-world energy exchange, and therapeutic modality, various online journals dedicated to breathwork have been established. These include *The Healing Breath*, *Breathe Magazine* and the *International Society for the Advancement of Respiratory Psychophysiology*.

Modern psychotherapeutic traditions which have used breathing methods typically combined with relaxation and visualization techniques, include autogenic training, Jacobsen's progressive relaxation, holotropic breathwork and philophonetics (Loehr & Migdow, 1999; Taub-Bynum, 1984; Wolman, 1977). Conscious breathwork forms a meaningful foundation for exploration of temporality and spatiality related to personal and social worlds, the non-human environment and the cosmos.

Bodiliness

Vibrating our core of being-in the world, breathing forms a pre-reflective essence of our bodiliness. We experience its reassuring rhythms in harmony with nature and during rest. During arousal any sensation, movement, feeling and thought affect breathing. The physiology of breathing affords us an objective perspective on this essentially subjective bodily experience.

Blood flow is greater in the lower part of the lungs because of gravity - for example, 0.07 litres per minute with clavicular, 0.66 with thoracic and 1.29 litres per minute with diaphragmatic breathing. Thus the deeper and more fully the lungs are used, the greater the ratio of useful air-exchange to dead space (through oxygen and carbon-monoxide energy transformations in the trachea, bronchi, bronchioli, alveoli and capillaries of the lungs). The strongest muscle in the body, the diaphragm, has a pump-like action to change the size of the chest cavity, massage the internal organs and act as a second heart in distributing energy, blood and oxygen throughout the body. The amount of air delivered by diaphragm and chest varies widely during the day. Bed rest requires about 8 quarts of air per minute, sitting 16, walking 24 and running 50 (Loehr & Migdow, 1999; Reid, 2001; Taub-Bynum, 1984).

On inspiration, the diaphragm relaxes downwards, creating a vacuum and flow of air into the lungs. On expiration, the diaphragm contracts upwards, causing air in the lungs to be expelled outwards. Every in-breath is energizing and stimulating to the sympathetic division of the autonomous nervous system. Every out-breath is relaxing and stimulates the pneumogastric nerves along the spinal column and parasympathetic division of the autonomous nervous system. Deep breathing literally saves breath by slowing respiratory patterns and increasing the volume of air per breath from 500cc to up to 3000 cc. Besides being the primary human energy exchange with the environment, breathing balances and harmonizes all internal and external systems, such as digestion, circulation, neurochemical and endocrine systems, central, peripheral and autonomic divisions of the nervous systems (Loehr & Migdow, 1999; Reid, 2001; Taub-Bynum, 1984). The above-mentioned effect of breathing on the all-important sympathetic and parasympathetic divisions of the autonomic nervous system respectively responsible for rest and arousal is the key to energy control through various breathing methods. This essentially means that if more energy is required, inhalation must be longer than exhalation and, conversely, if rest is required, exhalation must be longer than inhalation. Breathing duration is typically and best measured in heartbeats. This means listening to the body and/or measuring heart rate at the wrist or jugular vein. The human rate of breathing is approximately a quarter the rate of heartbeats per minute.

The psychologist, Maslow (1959), postulated a hierarchy of survival and growth needs ranging from physiological, safety, belongingness and love through to self-esteem and self-actualization needs. In terms of physiological needs, we may list in order: breathing, water, sleep, food and movement. Except in cases of extended cellular respiration in infants, yogis and other breathing adepts, humans only live for a very few minutes without breathing.

Spirituality

Ancient African, Greek, Indian and Chinese traditions have recognized the subtle vital animating and energizing aspects of breathing in such concepts as *umoya, psyche, prana and chi,* which form the essence of various spiritual traditions. In that the term 'spirit' is derived from the Latin word 'spiritus', meaning breath, and healing implies a process of making whole, spiritual healing is concerned, quite particularly, literally and originally, with holistic breathing transformations (Hergenhahn, 2001; Myers, 1993).

Such beliefs and practices are grounded in the experience and observed phenomena of life and death. This phenomenology has always been the special province of the shaman, traditional healer, diviner, psychologist and priest, as revealed in the following Judaic and Christian quotations (*Life Application Study Bible*, 1991):

> The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2, verse 7)
>
> Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the father has sent me, I am sending you."

> And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (John 20, verse 21)

Similar spiritual themes occur in various other world religions and philosophies such as Islam, Buddhism, and Taoism, in recognition of breathing as the *sine qua non* of first human life.

The spiritual experience of being breathed by one's ancestors and/or God still occurs today in Zulu diviners (*izangoma*) in a containing process called *ukuphefumulela amadlozi* or *ukububula kwedlozi.* The first phrase literally means to be breathed by the ancestors; the second has connotations of moaning or groaning as the energy of the past lives of the ancestors is experienced in all their power, love and wisdom. Depending upon the depth of the past evolutionary ancestral call, diviners may breath like roaring lions *(ukubhodla kwengonyama*) or even pythons in their silent communication (*inhlwathi igingile*). However, typically the *isangoma* is breathed by recently departed ancestors who had previously appeared to her in dreams, called her to become a diviner and accompanied her through a creative illness in the form of a religious conversion experience until she completed her apprenticeship under a qualified diviner in a spiritual rebirth macro-process called *ukuthwasa*. This is a perennial way of society caring for and being cared by persons, first spiritually afflicted and then purified (Makunga, Edwards & Nzima, 1997; Mfusi & Edwards, 1985; Ngubane, 1977).

From an evolutionary perspective, converging lines of evidence from various disciplines such as behavioural genetics, linguistics, palaeontology and archaeology all point consistently to Africa as the cradle of civilization for all humanity, with homo sapiens evolving some one hundred and fifty thousand years ago and gradually emigrating across the Sinai Peninsula some fifty thousand years later (Jobling, Hurles & Tyler-Smith, 2004). While an infinity of factors such as language and creative intelligence would have played a role, it is clear that contemporary humanity has survived primarily because of a remarkable facility to form and maintain social relationships (Jobling, Hurles & Tyler-Smith, 2004; Sykes 2001). The fundamental form of these links in human relationships is poetically portrayed in the Zulu saying "*umuntu umuntu ngabantu"*. This saying, which literally refers to the fact that a person becomes a person through other people - only through you do I become an I and I am because we are - has the deeper implications of a shared sense of self in both temporal and spatial dimensions that include the common ancestral heritage of contemporary humanity.

Sykes (2001, p. 353) has pointed out how we use our ancestral mitochondrial DNA formula constantly:

> Every atom of oxygen we take into our bodies when we breathe has to be processed according to the formula that has been handed down to us by our ancestors. This is a very fundamental connection in itself.

Further communal spirituality is amplified in the work of faith healers, typically belonging to an African Indigenous Church (AIC), whose Christian faith embraces ancestral spiritual energy (*umoya*), which has gained additional meaning through reverence of the trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (*Umoya Ongcwele*). There are no petty, doctrinaire theological conflicts - Christ as the ancestral, divine, Son of God and the peace, truth, power, love and wisdom in inspirational African indigenous healing is experienced at one and the same time and place in the body and breath of any particular individual in communal ancestral spirituality as graced and mediated by God, Christ and Holy Spirit. African Indigenous Churches' meetings can be found at any time throughout Africa. In their brightly coloured attire, such spiritual communities gather wherever convenient, at the river or the mountain, near the sea, at a vacant plot in town or at the bus stop, where spiritual energy is invoked through bible reading, praying, singing and dancing in a healing circle.

Ancient Hindu, Greek and Roman writings describe the energetic system of the psyche in terms of seven *chakras* or spinning wheels of energy, associated with particular anatomical locations of the spine and brain, plexuses of the nervous, endocrine and other human functional systems, as well as colours, sounds, patterns and symbols (Campbell, 1990; Mumford, 2005; Reid, 1998). For example, in Hindu philosophy, from perineum to crown, the *chakras muladhara, svadisthana, manipura, anahata, vishudda, ajna and sahasrara* are respectively associated with systemic functions of elimination, reproduction, digestion, circulation, respiration, nervation and ultimate realisation through relation with the cosmos. Breath and energy control through these *chakras* has been demonstrably linked to various psychosomatic phenomena such as cardiac cessation and peristalsis control and starting and stopping of bleeding (Mumford, 2005; Rama, Ballentine & Hymes, 1979). It is instructive that such energetic systems as *chakra* are essentially based on introspective, indigenous phenomenological forms of experiential knowledge

passed on over generations. As elucidated by Giorgi (1970), their truth value and objective validity is dependent upon the accuracy with which their presence is reported and agreed upon by others' experience of the same phenomena.

Although fundamentally similar and mainly based on the teachings of the *Tantric* Buddhist monk Bodhidharma, an essential difference between Indian and Chinese systems of breath control is the relatively greater emphasis on breath co-ordinated movement in the Chinese system. Specific *Chi-gung* breathing exercises include four-stage breath control (Reid, 1989, 1993, 1998, 2003). In practice, these four stages flow harmoniously, orchestrated by the pump-like action of the diaphragm, stringing together a smooth, continuous sequence, like waves on the sea. When deconstructed, the stages are, firstly, long slow inhalation; secondly, retention of up to ten heart-beats while pressing down the diaphragm and locking the perineum, lower abdomen and glottis; thirdly, long slow exhalation; and, fourthly, a pause in which the lower abdomen is pulled inwards and upwards, thereby expelling all stale air and providing an invigorating massage to the internal organs before allowing the diaphragm to fall back into place with the next cycle of slow inhalation.

Illness Prevention and Health Promotion

Deep abdominal breathing breaks the cycle of stress. Regulation of the motion of the lungs through conscious observation and control of breathing, leads to regulation of heart function via the vagus nerve, with its direct links to the involuntary or autonomic nervous system. With practice, involuntary systems become progressively more open to voluntary conscious control. In an internal cybernetic biofeedback loop, such control in turn influences brainwave activity, production of neurochemicals such as endorphins, and higher level consciousness as in alpha conditioning and meditation (Loehr & Migdow, 1999; Reid, 1998; Taub-Bynum, 1984). Concerning stress and energy patterns, the *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* written about 2700BC (Reid, 1998, p. 91) states:

> Anger causes energy to rise, joy causes energy to slow down, grief causes energy to dissipate, fear causes energy to descend, fright causes energy to scatter, exhaustion causes energy to wither, worry causes energy to stagnate.

Reid (1998) has referred to emotion as energy in motion, and he notes how observation of breathing during emotional moments reveals specific breathing patterns (Reid, 1989, p. 92). Grief brings short, slow, shallow sighs and sometimes halts breathing. Anger causes an erratic huffing and puffing as it shifts the breath from nostrils to mouth. Fear causes a gulping, swallowing and withholding pattern of breath, with long retention and short, tentative exhalation. Anxiety causes the breath to rise to the top of the lungs and grow short, shallow and fast, like a panting dog. In such ways emotions upset normal breathing patterns, which can be immediately restored with a few minutes of deep breathing. Vigilance and prompt correction of abnormal breathing patterns is an immediate form of illness prevention and health promotion. Conversely, if left untreated, chronic emotionality typically leads to muscular blockages against thorough expulsion of stale air (Hewitt, 1977; Reich, 1942).

The benefits of deep breathing can readily be experienced through daily practice. The consciously slow, silent, smooth in- and out-breath stages produce sublime sensations. Brief breath retention has many particular benefits. It slows and deepens the pulse, balances blood pressure, produces a compression, which extends throughout the circulatory system, enhances the exchange of gases, enriches the blood with more supplies of oxygen and elimination of carbon dioxide, triggers the innate response of cellular respiration, breaking down blood sugar to release oxygen and produce body heat, and keeps the autonomous nervous system in parasympathetic healing mode (Reid, 1998, p. 133). Breathing exercises are best done in the early morning when the atmosphere is relatively unpolluted and full of negative ionic energy.

Galante (1981) reviewed reports of some 500 successfully treated patients at Shanghai and Tangshan Sanatoriums, using respiration therapy (*chi-gung*) alone. Reid (1998, p. 120) reports on Wahzhan Zhineng Chi-gung Clinic and Training Centre in Qinuadao, China, where De Pang Ming developed a *chi-gung* programme called *chi lel* which consists of four parts: instruction in *chi-gung* dynamics, group healing sessions, individual treatment with emitted *chi* and individual practice in various *chi-gung* sets. Medical records for 10,000 cases reveal an overall success rate of 95%, with 15% experiencing total cure and return to normal functioning, 38% experiencing very effective results in terms of vital function tests, with almost complete disappearance of symptoms, and 42% effective results in terms of noticeable improvement in vital functioning.

As a form of health promotion, deep breathing and continuously moving meditation, *Tai Chi,* is the single most popular style of *chi-gung* found

throughout the world today (Reid 1998, 2003). *Tai Chi* constitutes a low impact, low to moderate intensity exercise, incorporating elements of relaxation, flexibility, balance, and strength, in a series of continuous breath co-ordinated movements. Exercise features include continuous shifting of weight on left and right feet, with bending and flexion of knees, straight back and neck, trunk rotation and asymmetrical diagonal arm and leg movements, mostly in a semi squat position. The exercise intensity is variable and can be adjusted by the height of the postures, duration of the practise session and training style. It is suitable for all persons, of all ages and fitness levels, and can be performed individually or in groups in any setting (Taylor-Piliae & Froelicher, 2004). Recent comprehensive research reviews on *chi-gung* and *Tai Chi* have revealed substantial evidence for illness prevention and health promotion. Findings include significant improvements in aerobic capacity, strength, balance, flexibility, relaxation, mood, cardio-respiratory functioning, longevity, blood pressure, osteoporosis, low back pain, arthritis, stress, anxiety, depression, quality of life, and psychosocial and immune functioning (Gallagher, 2003; Lan, Lai & Chen, 2002; Taylor-Piliae & Froelicher, 2004).

Reid (2003, p. 90) has referred to breath as the only vital autonomous function that can be consciously controlled by the mind, and to breathing as a sort of tuning device to balance and harmonize all functional systems of the body. In fact, given the degree of conscious breath control possible, and consequent channelling of the free energy of the universe, through ever more sophisticated breathing skills, there seem infinite benefits to such established practices as *pranayama* and *chi-gung* and various other modern cultural therapeutics inspired by a tradition of researchers such as Jacobsen (1938), Schultz and Luthe (1959), Cooper (1968), Benson, Beary and Carol (1974), Grof (1998), and Pilates (Worth, 2003), all of which use related relaxation and aerobic techniques (Edwards, 2005).

Experiencing the Meaning of Breathing

A phenomenological approach requires persistent discipline and insistence on continuous careful bracketing of bias and rigorous suspension of assumptions, preconceptions and theories in order to reveal continually original, new or fresh reality. One way is to include a personal description of the particular phenomenon under investigation. This is done below, followed by three vignettes, chosen as the best examples of meaningful breathing experiences from a convenience sample of over 60 descriptions of meaningful breathing experience collected through individual and group interviews with students, colleagues and friends.

My personal experiences were informed by various local and international talks and workshops on various breathing methods. The other vignettes, given fictitious names to guarantee confidentiality, were graphically recorded during interviews. Respondents were all chosen on the basis of their established relationship with the author, insight into and experience in breathing methods, and willingness to discuss their experiences. During interviews they were simply asked to describe a meaningful breathing experience. This single question formed the central theme, which was maintained with appropriate reflective techniques throughout the interview. Respondents personally edited their respective transcribed narratives to ensure validity and reliability. The transcribed narratives were analysed following a general method described by authors such as Giorgi (1970), Stones (1986), Kruger (1988) and Polkinghorne (1989). Essentially this consisted of repeated reading to obtain a sense of the whole before analysis into the smallest naturally occurring units of experience. The vignettes appear below. They are preceded by individual summary profiles in the form of an introduction and followed by discussion explicating the essential structure of these meaningful breathing experiences.

A. Steve's Story

Steve described meaningful breathing experiences related to his parents' death and children's birth. An ex-smoker, he personally rediscovered breathing during a long distance race in which he had the sublime sensation of being effortlessly breathed by an infinite supply of air. He practises various deep breathing methods, which have improved all aspects of his life.

The most meaningful moments in my life have been related to breathing experiences (1). I was fortunate to be with both my parents, who died of smoking related causes, when they breathed their last (2) and with both my children when they breathed their first breath (3). Since then I have been fortunate to learn from, teach and help others in their personal practice (4) as well as at local and international lectures and workshops on breathing (5). It's an infinite topic (6). I feel as if I am still only beginning to experience the meaning of breathing (7).

I personally rediscovered breathing at age fifty (8). I had been a smoker (9) and only after about ten years of non-smoking (10) and regular distance running (11) did I fully experience breathing again (12). This

occurred initially during a running race (13). With relaxed, diaphragmatic breathing, came the sublime sensation of being effortlessly breathed by an infinite supply of air (14). This gave special meaning to the 'stop smoking' family pact by my father, mother, wife and myself (15), which has not been broken (16).

Such experiences have lead to an increasing fascination with the meaning and forms of breathing (17), as related to changing consciousness and controlling of energy levels (18), for example to relax with longer out-breaths and psych-up with longer in-breaths (19). I have learned that meaningful breathing experiences are especially associated with contexts of survival, consciousness, energy, quality of life, illness prevention and health promotion (20).

Since practising deep breathing on a daily basis I have had only one, very mild, bout of 'flu in the last six years (21). My spiritual life has improved through the practice of Christianity, chi-gung, tai chi, yoga, meditation and prayer (22). There have been related improvements in all other spheres of life - work, love, sex, emotional, social and intellectual (23). I have found great value in the personal practice as well as coaching of various breathing related techniques such as visualization, positive self-talk, centring and concentration in diverse health and sport psychological contexts (24).

Meaningful breathing is one of life's fundamental essences (25). Considering that breathing has different meanings in diverse contexts, practising a variety of breathing exercises has great value as will become apparent in the following vignettes (26).

B. Sandy's Story

Sandy described breathing experiences associated with tension reduction, and pleasurable and peaceful feelings, through the use of natural elements, relaxation, imagination, focusing and a higher level of consciousness. A special philophonetic technique was described which brought joyful and empowering experiences.

Prior to 2002 breathing to me was associated with relaxation exercises where tension would be relieved by breathing in and breathing out (1). I used to use this form of breathing when I felt tired (emotionally), i.e., feeling tired without any physical activities such walking long distances or carrying heavy objects etc. (2). In many ways this form of breathing was a way of creating pleasurable feelings within my self (3). I used it with psychiatric patients as well (4). Those who were not floridly psychotic found it useful (5) and demanded at least one session per week (6) where they would have a quiet place (7) to imagine a peaceful and attractive scene they had experienced in their lives (8). This gave them an opportunity to create peace within themselves (9) while they were breathing in all the good experiences associated with the environment they were imagining (10). After such an exercise I would also feel relaxed (11) and ready to continue with the rest of the day (12).

It was only in 2002 when I was conscious of the natural elements, such as the sun, air, vegetation, water/sea, sand etc., that the power of imagination and focus was realized for the first time (13). Because I was on the other side of the Indian Ocean for a period of seven and half months for the first time, there were times when I felt there was something missing in me and I would 'feel down' (14). My college [a private alternative healing organization] helped me with specific breathing techniques, which I regard as operating at the higher level of the "SELF" (15). Now I am aware of the interconnectedness of the body, soul and mind (16). Philophonetics claims that our bodies do not lie (17). If, for example, there is something that makes you unhappy, philophonetics maintains that if you sense into "IT", the imprint, you will be able to locate it in your body (18). Once the imprint has been located, it demands visualizing "IT"(19). See the size, shape, its colour and movement (20). See how it affects you (or what it does to you - movement) (21). What I found powerful was, and still is, the choice of the natural element that is chosen to remove the imprint (22). Usually when we feel down the imprint stays in the heart, which is regarded as a delicate organ (23). In my case of feeling down I choose a green colour, which represents the power of nature (24). As I breathe in, the focus is on the movement of the colour gradually taking space in the heart (25). While breathing out I concentrate on the imprint as it leaves the heart (26). The process of breathing the imprint carries on until the imprint is reduced to manageable proportions or removed completely (27). The removal of the imprint brings joy to the soul (28) and empowers the individual to take charge of one's life (29). These specific exercises maintain that we can look after ourselves by listening to our bodies and their needs (30).

C. Jack's Story

Jack described a rebirthing breathing technique. This involves rapid breathing which is initially stressful and anxiety provoking. As the anxiety is breathed out and breathing slows, stressful experiences transform into feelings of ease and euphoria. Regular rebirthing breathing experiences improved academic activities.

Rebirthing is a particularly useful technique for reducing stress (1). In the rebirthing process one lies down with eyes closed and one tries to breathe very rapidly (2). One tries to breathe perhaps as rapidly as one would breathe if one were jogging at a reasonable pace (3). At first, the overabundance of oxygen in the blood makes one feel dizzy (4). At this early stage in the process there is a tendency to start dreaming and for the breathing to slow down (5). Sometimes one actually falls asleep. It is for this reason that rebirthing requires an assistant, someone who monitors the breathing (6), telling you to speed up your breathing or who wakes you up if you have fallen asleep (7). If one is able to keep up a steady pace of breathing, the dizziness disappears and is usually replaced by feelings of anxiety and discomfort (8). This anxiety and discomfort build up and may reach levels which, at first, could be quite frightening (9). One even finds oneself writhing and twisting on the bed, almost as if one had an extreme form of food poisoning or a very high temperature (10). At this point the assisting person can reassure one that these feelings of anxiety and discomfort are perfectly normal and that one should try to breathe out the pain and the anguish (11). Sometimes this discomfort is accompanied by memories of painful or embarrassing situations, and one begins to relive those moments (12). During rebirthing, however, one is free to give immediate vent to the anguish by crying or flagellating (13). At other times the discomfort is purely physical (14). Almost every time that I have gone through a rebirthing session I have found that both hands were twisted and locked into a very painful and uncomfortable position, as if each hand was attempting to touch its own wrist (15). I usually ask the assisting person to pry open my hands to give me some relief (16), but for as long as I am breathing rapidly, the relief is usually short lived as the hands immediately move back into the uncomfortable position (17). Perhaps this is a posture of anxiety or fear (18). There is, of course, the theory that what one experiences during this process is one's own birth (19). One's birth, it is claimed, is a very traumatic experience (20), and by reliving it, one finally deals with it, and is released from tension which has been in one's psycho-physiological makeup from the moment of birth (21). The goal of the session is to breathe through the pain or anxiety barrier (22). I am not always sure whether I have made it through this pain barrier (23), but at some point one is allowed to slow down one's breathing (24). The slowing down seems to produce remarkable feelings of ease and euphoria (25). I am aware of the experience of relaxation after yoga or during transcendental meditation (26). The experience after rebirthing is many times more intense than that which follows either yoga or T.M. (27). Tension and creativity are incompatible (28). The more relaxed I am, the more creative I am in my work (29). Rebirthing played an important role in my life during those periods when I had to complete large amounts of academic work (30).

D. Tiny's Story

Tiny described meditation, when breath becomes finer - consciousness transcends itself, and one slips beyond conscious thinking into eternity or unity with the absolute. This is an experience of bliss that is beyond words. Even one meditation session banishes depression and improves life.

I do a breathing technique, alternate nostril breathing, *pranayama,* prior to meditation (1). When meditating I don't think about breathing at all (2) - it actually stops in fact or settles to such an extent that sometimes you wonder if you are breathing (3). The breath is so fine (4). It is not a conscious effort to arrive at that state (5) - it's just a by-product of relaxation (6). I like to meditate at least once a day (7). Meditation means a state of non-conditional peace (8). It is not linked to any particular doctrine experiences (9) - by that I mean one loses a sense of boundaries (10) - then after the meditation one feels very relaxed, positive and in tune with life (11). I started with a T.M. group (12), was initiated by a teacher into the technique (13), who said it was free of religion and philosophy (14) - the founder is a Hindu (15), so perceptions in the teaching of this technique are related to this world view (16). As your breath becomes finer - consciousness transcends itself (17). You slip beyond conscious thinking into 'eternity' or unity with the 'absolute' (18). That is the basis of the philosophy - that there is an absolute reservoir of creativity and intelligence underlying material life (19). You only know that you have experienced it (20) and cannot verbalize it (21) - simply know that you have been 'there' (22) - a period has passed that you cannot count (23); it's an experience of bliss (24) and sometimes it's only for a fraction of a second that you have dipped into it (25). You can't force it (26); it comes when you least expect it (27). You cannot anticipate its coming (28), but even if it does not happen, the type of psychic rest you obtain is quite extra-ordinary (29). It's been demonstrated here at university - for weeks when I don't meditate I get depressed (30). One just needs to meditate once and suddenly one's take on life improves (31).

Discussion

Although the stories are diverse, there is some original, fresh, extra-ordinary, altered state of consciousness associated with each meaningful

breathing experience. For Steve, this was a rediscovery of breathing during a running race and the sublime sensation of being breathed by an infinite supply of air (A8, 13-14, 18, 20). For the first time, Sandy realized the power of combining breathing methods with elements of nature, imagination and focus during an overseas philophonetics course (B13, 16). Jack described his experience of rapid breathing during the rebirthing technique as many times more intense than either yoga or transcendental meditation (C5, 27). Tiny experienced breathing as actually stopping, settling, or becoming very fine in meditation as one slips beyond conscious thinking into eternity or union with the absolute (D2-4, 17-18).

All stories describe an enhanced quality of life and energy. For Steve, this relates to both the improvement and the control of energy levels. General energy improvement is experienced through conscious deep breathing. Longer in-breaths are used consciously to increase energy levels and longer out-breaths to decrease energy levels (A19-20). Sandy imagines stimulating inhalation of natural colours and cleansing exhalation of any negative imprints (B24-26). For Jack, the intense negative experience of rapid breathing is followed by slower breathing which brings remarkable feelings of ease and euphoria, increased creativity and ability to complete large amounts of academic work (C24-25, 29-30). Tiny has contact with what is described as an absolute reservoir of creativity and intelligent life. Even if this blissful experience does not occur, the type of psychic rest obtained is described as quite extraordinary (D19, 24, 29).

Meaningful breathing experiences are particularly associated with the prevention of illness and the promotion of health. Steve mentions that since practising deep breathing on a daily basis he has had only one, very mild, bout of 'flu in the last six years (A21) and he has noted improvements in all spheres of life - occupational, emotional, and social, as well as intellectual and spiritual (A22-23). He has assisted individuals and groups in various breathing related techniques such as visualization, positive self-talk, centring and concentration in diverse health and sport psychological contexts (A24). Sandy practised breathing and relaxation exercises, which were very helpful with psychiatric patients who were not floridly psychotic (B1-12). When feeling down overseas, Sandy found that philophonetic breathing, in particular, was able to reduce or remove negative imprints, and bring empowerment and joy to the soul (B27-29). Jack discovered that rebirthing is a particularly useful technique for reducing stress (C1). Tiny notes that meditation is an immediate antidote for depression (D30-32).

Clearly, meaningful breathing experiences have infinite functions. Those mentioned in the four stories included life and death, survival, energy control, stimulation, relaxation, illness prevention (especially reduction of influenza, stress, anxiety and depression), health promotion in the form of pleasurable feelings, joy, empowerment, and improvement in all spheres of life, spiritual, emotional, social, occupational and academic. Further second order functions are implicit in all the stories. These include anchoring, bridging, mediating, transcending and healing functions. As mentioned above, the anchoring function provides a form of grounding which allows scattered experiences to be contained. In this connection, Reid (1998) has described therapeutic breathing as an antidote for the 'monkey mind' of scattered thoughts, the 'chief hooligan' of uncontrolled emotion and 'five thieves' of wayward senses. Moreover, the linking, dialogical or bridging function of meaningful breathing experiences deserves special mention in connecting various modes of Being, states of consciousness and experiences of time and space. These findings support those of authors such as Hewitt (1977), Lan et al. (2002), Reid (1998) and Taub-Bynum (1984). Particular experiences are also uniquely human in their bodiliness, mentality and spirituality. They improve practical knowledge of life, death and the beyond. They enhance human integrity, dignity and freedom. Their preventive and promotive healing function is clearly apparent.

> The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance, this is true of motor habits such as dancing and sport. Sometimes, finally the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means, it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 146)

These explicit words of Merleau-Ponty on the meaning-producing activities of the body can be amplified and extended in the spirit of our enquiry into meaningful breathing experiences. It should also be noted that a breath co-ordinated activity such as singing and dancing may involve more than simple motor habits and in itself may facilitate acute insights

into the depth, meaning and essence of our social-cultural existences. It is through the movement and gestures of the lived-body that we create and disclose our world (Meyer, 1988). The human body reaches its expressive zenith in various physical, socio-cultural and spiritual activities such as breath co-ordinated dance activities, which have vital therapeutic functions as in the following description of a typical healing dance by the "first" or "real" people, as the Southern African *!Kung* refer to themselves (Katz & Wexler, 1989, p. 23):

> *!Kung* healing involves health and growth on physical, psychological, social and spiritual levels; it affects the individual, the group, the surrounding environment and the cosmos. Healing is an integrating and enhancing force that is far more fundamental than simple curing or the application of medicine. Sometimes, as often as four times a month, the women sit around the fire, singing and rhythmically clapping as night falls, signalling the start of a healing dance. The entire camp participates. The men, sometimes joined by the women, dance around the singers. As the dance intensifies, *n/um* ("energy") is activated in those who are healers, most of whom are among the dancing men. As *n/um* intensifies in the healers, they experience *!kia* ("a form of enhanced consciousness") during which they heal everyone at the dance. The dance usually extends far into the night, often ending as the sun rises the next morning. Those at the dance confront the uncertainties of their existence and reaffirm the spiritual dimension of their daily lives.

As we are instructed in the example of *!Kung* healing, it is vital to remember, in the first instance, that such breath co-ordinated healing activities are universal, transcultural and perennial. We are concerned with a universal human healing dance of, with, by, for and in the community accomplishing the original meaning of healing as "making whole" through transforming from illness towards health. Through such dances, we are concerned with perennial healing that has been passed on over generations, often in the form of oral transmission of indigenous knowledge, beliefs and practices that serve both to preserve individual, family and community homoeostasis and to transform individuals and societies towards health.

Chi gung is contemporary, popular, therapeutic refinement of conscious breath co-ordinated movements. As *Tai chi* it is the quintessential form of dance. This is referred to as a moving meditation because it blends slow body movements with a serene state of mind in a macrocosmic circulation of light and healing energy via all the channels of the body. To understand fully the role of movement in activities such as *Tai chi*, we must also comprehend the central significance of stillness (Reid, 1998). *Tai chi* is complemented and balanced by an internal dance, with microcosmic circulation of energy through cyclic waves of breathing and motions of the blood, in still-sitting forms of *Chi-gung* and meditation. It is such still, soft, slow, silent, smooth breathing, which forms the foundation for various altered states of consciousness.

To sum up, we are grounded in our experience of the lived body. This bodiliness accounts for the primarily pathic mode with which phenomena of the lived world are initially revealed to us. In dialogue with the world, the lived body is a source of pre-reflective intentionality, meaning and goal directed behaviour (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). An essence of this bodiliness is the comforting presence of our breathing, which is the precondition for transcendence as Tiny has so clearly articulated. During times of clarity and equanimity we are comforted by the rhythmic regularity of our breathing and its harmony with the bodily phenomena that appear to our consciousness. Still-sitting and moving forms of breath co-ordinated behaviour form the foundation for all forms of healing and transcendence as exemplified in alpha conditioning, biofeedback, transcendental meditation, *!Kung* healing dance and *Tai chi* (Edwards, 2005; Hewitt, 1977; Reid, 1998). Building on positive breathing experiences that have been bodily re-experienced as anchors is the phenomenological base for remedial breathing, progressive relaxation, systematic desensitisation, visualization and imagery used in breathwork, crisis intervention and almost all forms of healing, psychotherapy, illness prevention and health promotion (Edwards, 2005; Ivey, Ivey & Simek-Morgan, 1997).

Conclusion

The themes and experiences collectively underline the fundamental meaning of breath for life, consciousness and energy. Breath control is an activity natural to many human activities such as swimming and singing. With practice, further conscious control over various typically involuntary functions of the body can be achieved. The experiential vignettes resonate the themes and literature on breathing skills related to various forms of breath control and channelling of energy. The individual, original nature of the experiences is a reminder that once universal free energy of air is breathed it somehow becomes a

unique property for which each individual human being is responsible.

Experiencing the meaning of breathing is to experience more meaning in life itself in all its aspects and phases. Meaningful breathing experiences typically reveal some previously unconscious, relational, extra-ordinary, fresh, original facet of life, which serves to harmonise various aspects of experience, conscious and unconscious, personal and transpersonal. Such experiences form the basis of various religions, philosophies and systems of cultural therapeutics.

Breathing exercises are valuable, given that breathing has a different meaning in different contexts. Various ancient and modern systems of breathing skills have evolved over the years. These can be complemented with techniques such as visualization, centring and concentration. Finally, given the abundant evidence for their value and power in various forms and contexts, breathing skills may be regarded as the original method of survival, energy control, improving quality of living, preventing illness and promoting health.

About the Author

Steve Edwards has been Professor and Head of the Psychology Department of the University of Zululand since 1982. He has a Bachelor's and an Honours degree in Psychology from Rhodes University (1971) as well as a PhD from the University of Cape Town (1974) and a DEd from the University of South Africa (1992). He has also been awarded various diplomas and certificates. He is registered as both a Clinical and an Educational Psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa and is a Chartered Clinical, Sport and Exercise Psychologist with the British Psychological Society.

Steve has received various academic and professional awards from the Universities of Cape Town, Zululand, and South Africa, the National Research Foundation, and the Institute for People Management, and was awarded a USA Fulbright Scholarship. He has been involved in the introduction, teaching and examination of applied Master's and Doctoral degrees in Psychology at most South African Universities. He has supervised over 60 Masters and Doctoral theses, mainly in Clinical and Community Psychology, and is the author of over 100 scientific publications. Professor Edwards has served on the Boards of several national and international scientific journals as well as various other organizations. He is a South African National Research Foundation rated researcher.

Steve Edwards's research, teaching and professional activities are mainly concerned with health promotion. He has presented papers in clinical, community, educational, sport and exercise psychology at international conferences in South Africa, Uganda, Senegal, United States of America, Australia, New Zealand, England, Finland, Singapore, Austria, Denmark, Portugal, Spain and Greece. He is married with two children, a daughter and a son.

Acknowledgement

Special thanks are extended by the author to all collaborators in the research reported, including the University of Zululand and the National Research Foundation for research support.

References

Benson, H., Beary, J. F., & Carol, M. P. (1974). The relaxation response. *Psychiatry*, *37*, 37-46.

Campbell, J. (1990). *Transformations of myth through time*. New York: Harper & Row.

Cooper, K. H. (1968). *Aerobics*. New York: Evans & Co.

Edwards, S. D. (2001). Phenomenology as intervention. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, *1*(2), 1-10.

Edwards, S. D. (2002). Experiencing the meaning of exercise. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, *2*(2), 1-11.

Edwards, S. D. (2005). A psychology of breathing methods. *International Journal of Mental Health Promotion, 7*(4), 28-34.

Edwards, S. D., Makunga, N. V., & Nzima, D. R. (1997). Harmonizing traditional and modern forms of community psychology in Zululand, South Africa. In S. M. Madu, P. K. Baguma, & A. Pritz (Eds.), *In quest for psychotherapy for Africa* (pp. 159-167). Sovenga: University of the North.

Gallagher, B. (2003). Tai chi chuan and qigong; physical and mental practice for functional mobility. *Topics in Geriatric Rehabilitation, 19*, 172-182.

Galante, L. (1981). *Tai chi: The supreme ultimate.* Maine: Samuel Weiser.

Giorgi, A. (1970). *Psychology as a human science: A phenomenologically based approach.* New York: Harper & Row.

Grof, S. (1998). *The adventure of self-discovery.* Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press.

Heidegger, M. (1927). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row.

Hergenhahn, B. R. (2001). *An introduction to the history of psychology.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

Hewitt, J. (1977). *The complete yoga book.* New York: Schocken Books.

Husserl, E. (1917/1981). Pure phenomenology, its method and its field of investigation. In P. McCormick & F. A. Elliston (Eds.), *Husserl: Shorter works* (pp. 9-17). Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

Ivey, A. E., Ivey. M. B., & Simek-Morgan, L. (1997). *Counselling and psychotherapy: A multicultural perspective*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Jacobsen, E. (1938). *Progressive relaxation.* Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

James, W. (1890*). Principles of psychology*. New York: Henry Holt.

Jobling, M. A., Hurles, M. E., & Tyler-Smith, C. (2004). *Human evolutionary genetics*. New York: Garland Publishing.

Katz, R., & Wexler, A. (1989). Healing and transformation: Lessons from indigenous people (Botswana). In K. Peltzer & P. Ebigbo (Eds.), *Clinical psychology in Africa* (pp. 19-43). Nigeria: Chuka.

Kruger, D. (1988). *An introduction to phenomenological psychology*. Cape Town: Juta/Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Lan, C., Lai, J., & Chen, S. (2002). Tai Chi Chuan. An ancient wisdom on exercise and health promotion. *Sports Medicine*, *32*, 218-225.

Life Application Study Bible (1991*).* Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers.

Loehr, J. E., & Migden, J. A. (1999). *Breathe in, breathe o*ut. Alexandra, Virginia: True Life Books.

Makunga, N. V., Edwards, S. D., & Nzima, D. R. (1997). Methods of African traditional healers. In S. M. Madu, P. K. Baguma, & A. Pritz (Eds.), *In quest for psychotherapy for Africa* (pp. 9-19). Sovenga: University of the North.

Maslow, A. H. (1959). *Toward a psychology of being* (2nd ed.). New York: Van Nostrand.

Merleau Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Meyer, K. V. (1988). Embodiment, sport and meaning. In W. J. Morgan & K. V. Meier (Eds.), *Philosophic inquiry in sport* (pp. 93-102). Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics.

Mfusi, K. S., & Edwards, S. D. (1985). The role of dreams for Zulu indigenous practitioners. *Psychotherapeia and Psychiatry in Practice*, *40*, 16-20.

Mumford, J. (2005). *Chakra and kundalini workbook.* Delhi: Pustak Mahal.

Myers, L. (1993). *Understanding an Afrocentric worldview: Introduction to an optimal psychology.* Kendal Hunt: Dubuque.

Ngubane, H. (1977). *Body and mind in Zulu medicine*. London: Academic Press.

Polkinghorne, D. (1989). Phenomenological research methods. In R. S. Valle & S. Halling (Eds.), *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology* (pp. 41-59). New York: Plenum Books.

Ralston, P. A. (1999). *Yoga*. Glasgow; Harper Collins Publishers.

Rama, S., Ballentine, R., & Hymes, A. (1979). *Science of breath*. Honesdale, P.A: Himalayan International Institute.

Reich. T. (1942). *The discovery of the orgone.* New York: Noonday Press.

Reid, D. (1989). *The Tao of health, sex and longevity: A modern practical approach to the ancient way*. London: Simon & Schuster.

Reid, D. (1993). *Guarding the three treasures*: *The Chinese way of health.* London: Simon & Schuster.

Reid, D (1998). *Chi-Gung. Harnessing the power of the universe.* London: Simon & Schuster.

Reid, D. (2003). *The Tao of detox.* London: Simon & Schuster.

Schultz, J. A., & Luthe, W. (1959). *Autogenic training: A physiologic approach in psychotherapy.* New York: Grune & Stratton.

Spinelli, E. (1989). *The interpreted world: An introduction to phenomenological psychology.* London: Sage.

Stones, C. R. (1986). Phenomenological praxis: A constructive alternative to research in psychology. *South African Journal of Psychology*, *16*, 117-121.

Sykes, B. (2001). *The seven daughters of Eve*. Exeter: Corgi Books.

Taub-Bynum, E. B. (1984). *The family unconscious*. Wheaton, Ill: Quest Books.

Taylor-Piliae, R. E., & Froelicher, E. S. (2004). The effectiveness of Tai Chi exercise in improving aerobic capacity: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing*, *19*, 48-57.

Wolman, B. (1977). *The technique of psychotherapy.* New York: Grune and Stratton.

Worth, Y. (2003). *Pilates.* Glasgow: Harper Collins.
